

Russia Wins Epic Battle for Bakhmut

by Sen. Richard H. Black

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May 24—On May 20, 2023, Russian armed forces won the greatest European battle since World War II. Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner Group, announced, “Today on May 20, around midday, Bakhmut was taken in its entirety.”

Although Prigozhin’s troops, which included paroled prisoners, bore the brunt of the fighting, they never would have won without heavy support from regular Russian troops, artillery, and air power.

Though stragglers remained, most escaped or were killed as Ukrainian Armed Forces retreated. Their high command continues denying the city’s fall, but the areas held by Ukraine are inconsequential; Russia is conducting mopping-up operations at this point.

The tide of battle was clouded earlier last week when mechanized UAF assaults pushed the Russians back from the northern and southern flanks. The Ukrainian attacks advanced 1,700 meters (about a mile) in some places, but at great cost. Led by the elite Azov Battalion, they succeeded in securing escape routes for troops still trapped inside Bakhmut.

Casualties were enormous. Russians and Ukrainians both claimed the other side suffered disproportion-



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Both the Ukrainian and Russian forces suffered heavy losses in the battle for Bakhmut. Here, a view of the southwestern part of Bakhmut (Artemovsk) during the battle for the city, April 2023.

ately, yet it seems that many died on both sides. However, the losses pose a much greater problem for Ukraine, whose population is just a quarter of Russia’s.

Significance of Russian Victory

It is unclear whether the loss of Bakhmut will impact Ukraine’s once imminent Spring offensive. Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky seemed taken off guard by his defeat during the [May 19] G-7 meeting. At first, he seemed to concede defeat, but later claimed that Ukraine’s army was still engaged.

Zelensky used Bakhmut’s “heroic defense” as a selling point for soliciting advanced weapons, though none of them has dramatically altered the course of the war. It is unclear whether Ukraine’s defeat will make it difficult to secure new

supplies of weapons.

Western media seemed initially confused with how to treat news of Bakhmut’s fall. Some dismissed the



Government of the Russian Federation

Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner Group.

city as unimportant, others claimed Ukraine had drawn Russians into a treacherous killing ground. But by Monday, May 15, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* all seemed determined to ignore Russia's victory and divert attention to other, inconsequential, stories about the war.

In truth, this Russian victory is likely to have far-reaching implications. Zelensky ordered wave after wave of troops into combat with the war cry, "Bakhmut still stands!" Now, Bakhmut has fallen. It is gone.

The truth is that Ukraine suffered irreplaceable losses in Bakhmut. True, the Russians also suffered heavy losses. But many of those were criminals on parole from prisons. Ukraine lost thousands who were their best and brightest, the flower of their youth.

Bakhmut had considerable strategic value as the linchpin of Ukraine's defensive line. Its importance was underscored by Ukraine's willingness to suffer enormous casualties defending it. Beyond casualties, loss of the epic battle holds great political significance in a presidential election year.

Progress of the Fighting

Throughout the fall, Wagner forces fought their way into the outskirts of Bakhmut. But by December 28, the Institute for the Study of War incorrectly [assessed](#) that Russian troops had reached the culminating point where their combat power was exhausted.

As winter set in, Prigozhin's forces met fierce resistance that degenerated into a bloody stalemate of close-quarters trench warfare, where both sides suffered numerous casualties in the bitter cold.

But by January 16, the collapse of Soledar, a crucial town 15 km northeast of Bakhmut, gave Russian forces a much-needed tactical advantage. Advancing again, by February 5, Wagner forces gained fire con-



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Ukraine's willingness to suffer enormous casualties defending Bakhmut, suggests it had considerable strategic value in Ukraine's defensive line. Here, a view of a ruined residential area of the city, March 2023.

trol over supply routes vital to Ukraine's Bakhmut garrison. By February 22, Russia surrounded Bakhmut on three sides. On March 7, the UAF retreated across the Bakhmutka River, abandoning all of the city east of there.

On March 26, Wagner forces captured the sprawling AZOM metal works factory, and on April 3, the Town Hall, seat of the city government. By early May, the Institute for the Study of War reported that Ukraine held less than 5% of the city.

With the fall of Bakhmut imminent, in late May Ukraine launched costly attacks that recaptured paved roads out of Bakhmut, permitting remaining forces to retreat from the city.

Finally, late in the day on May 20, Russia's President Vladimir Putin congratulated Russian troops on their capture of Artemovsk, the Russian name for Bakhmut.

Mainstream media were hesitant to acknowledge Ukraine's defeat, even after it became clear that Zelensky had lost the city while sustaining crushing losses of manpower and armor. Those losses will put pressure on Zelensky to launch yet another offensive to prove his army can still advance. A wiser course would be to seek peace and end the bloodshed.

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